

ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
Jenni Lane	Bruny Island District School C/- Post Office, Alonnah 7150	German	Grade 3 - 6

AREA OF INVESTIGATION

This investigation was conducted at Bruny Island District School. This is Australia's southern-most school and the island is separated from mainland Tasmania by a ferry trip. Students at Bruny Island are in their second year of learning German. In 2006 students had fortnightly German classes, and this year they have had weekly sessions. German is somewhat of a community language on the island, as there are several families based on the island from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. 15% of students have a non-English speaking background, of which the most common language is German.

I am a third year teacher in my second year of teaching languages. My limited experience, combined with fortnightly contact time in 2006, has made it difficult to experiment with intercultural teaching approaches. My focus for this investigation was, *How can I use questions to encourage intercultural understanding in my students?* I chose this area of investigation as I hoped that my findings would be broadly applicable to my future language teaching, providing me with strategies that I would be able to adapt to different learning sequences (units of work).

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Introduction

I chose to base my investigation on tasks which centred on three authentic German written texts. The tasks required students in the grade 3/4/5/6 class to decipher and analyse the texts, with a focus on the strategies they used to decipher the texts.

Overview of Task 1 – supermarket catalogue

Students worked in their class "table groups" to analyse a double-sided page from a German supermarket catalogue. Students then shared their findings with the class, and answered my questions about how they worked out the German words. The following questions were used to guide the students' analysis of the page:

- Which products are being advertised on your page?
- Are there any brands that you recognise?
- Which German words did you recognise?
- Which German words could you work out?

Overview of Task 2 – furniture catalogue

Students worked in small groups so that there was one student from each of grade three, four, five and six in their group to analyse a double-sided page from a German furniture store catalogue. Within each group, students took on one of four roles – materials person, scribe, reporter or time-keeper. Students then shared their findings with the class, and answered my questions about how they worked out the German words. Students first answered the following two questions:

- What type of text is it?
- How did you know?

They then filled in a table with the following headings, using the German writing on their page:

- Words that are the same as English
- German words that you recognise
- German words that you can work out

Overview of Task 3 – take-away pizza menu

Students designed their “ideal pizza” – a pizza with all their favourite toppings. They were then divided into small friendship groups within grade 3/4 and grade 5/6 groupings. Within these small groups students answered the same questions and filled in the same table as was used in Task 2. The following week the students looked up pizza topping vocabulary in German-English dictionaries, and selected a pizza off the menu which they would order. Afterwards the students participated in a discussion about differences and similarities between common pizza toppings in Germany and Australia. This task is still ongoing at the time of writing up.

Modifications

I made several modifications to what I might normally have done in the classroom during the investigation. For example, these activities utilised more authentic material than the students had previously been exposed to. The activities were also designed to let the students demonstrate what they could understand through the use of their prior knowledge and analytical skills, as opposed to activities which were designed to practise a particular linguistic skill. One modification which I viewed as detrimental in some ways was that there was less spoken target language being used in class discussions. However, it could be argued that the students’ target language skills benefited from the new vocabulary and analytical skills that the students developed while undertaking these tasks.

DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED

Audio recordings of the class discussions had after each activity were the major source of data for my investigation. These were supplemented by my written observations and reflections. The fact that they were being recorded was initially unsettling for the students. They were extremely difficult to settle, and were talking over each other more than normal. The severity of their reactions to being recorded reduced over time, and by the third task they weren’t particularly fussed by it. The novelty appeared to have worn off by that stage.

FINDINGS

I used the audio recordings I made of class discussions to analyse the types of questions that I was asking students to elicit their intercultural understanding. I divided the types of questions I was asking into two categories:

- *Closed questions* – commonly questions which have only one correct answer. These could require a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, or require students to recall previously-learnt facts.
- *Open questions* – questions which target higher order thinking skills. These could be questions which require students to apply a rule or concept, or questions which ask students to give an opinion or explain their reasoning.

The following table summarises my findings:

Task	Closed Questions	Open Questions
Task 1	39%	61%
Task 2	34%	66%
Task 3	27.5%	72.5%

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

My results clearly illustrate a move towards asking students more open questions. I believe that this can be attributed to an increased awareness of the types of question that I was using to elicit intercultural understanding from students. I came from a starting point of knowing that open questions generally encourage higher order thinking skills in students. As my results show, in Task 1, I was already asking a higher proportion of open questions compared to closed questions. However, when listening to my recording, it was evident that I was not giving students adequate time or opportunity to elaborate on their responses, or to take their reasoning any further. There were some particularly cringe-inducing interactions, where I was not only summarising for the students, but answering for them. For example:

Student: “And we recognised the washing detergent as, like, I don’t know what it’s called, but...”

Teacher: “*Vollwaschmittel*? That one?”

Student: “Yeah, because of the...”

Teacher: Because it’s got *wasch* in it?”

Student: “Yeah, because of the *wasch*, and the container that it’s in as well, sort of.”

After listening to the recording of Task 1, I was much more aware of my own bad habits, and how they impacted on the students’ responses. I approached Task 2 slightly differently. Firstly, I planned the students’ groupings to include a spread of abilities. This allowed the younger or weaker students to learn from more-able students how they went about a task. I also designed a multi-purpose template to guide the students in how to categorise words that they came across. This helped to guide the class discussion later on. I also planned in advance some of the questions to which I wanted the students to respond. This helped me to ask the right types of question on the spot during the discussion, although I still found myself biting my tongue and rephrasing questions half-way through.

I felt like I got a higher quality response from students during Task 2 because of the more considered way in which I was phrasing the questions. I also found that students were more willing to respond to quite challenging questions, like “Why do you think that there were English words, like country and studio and sofa, that you found in the catalogue?” (as grammatically ugly as that question may have been). I made a conscious effort to only ask open questions to get the students to further explain their reasoning, rather than leading them with closed questions, or answering for them. For example:

Student: We worked out that *Schublade* means drawers.

Teacher: How did you work out that *Schublade* meant drawers?

Student: Because it says that there's three small drawers and four big drawers. Because that means big, *große* means big.

I also found that this approach encouraged the students to ask more unsolicited questions about the target language text. For example, one group noticed that the price of items was written in a different way from English, which prompted students to think and ask questions about how different currencies work.

By Task 3 I was feeling more confident in my ability to ask open questions, and found that I was asking them with less difficulty or hesitation. In my observations, the students were also more "tuned in" to the type of questions that they were going to be asked, and were able to respond more readily and demonstrate a deeper understanding than before we started this series of tasks. Students were increasingly able to follow through with a line of thought without me helping them get there, and they continued to come up with spontaneous questions related to the topic at hand. For example:

Teacher: Why do you think in Australia we would have a pizza that has crayfish and scallops and stuff on it?

Student: Germany doesn't have a sea near, so they wouldn't be able to have seafood. But how did they get the salmon?

MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS

Written Language Analysis Grid

Attached at the end of the report is the table I used to guide the students' investigation of written authentic texts. I have attached this as I believe it is a useful and multi-purpose format, which can be applied across different languages and text types.

EVALUATION

Evaluation

I feel that my investigation was successful, as it forced me to re-evaluate whether I was teaching in an intercultural way. This was something which I was particularly focused on as an undergraduate teaching student, but I had noticed that I was getting a little lazy in the way I was teaching some topics to students. By lazy, I mean relying more on activities which required students to practise a particular linguistic skill, rather than giving them the opportunity to "discover" it for themselves.

I was actually surprised at how much of a difference it made to what the students were able to express when I focused on asking open questions. It not only encouraged students to engage in higher order thinking about the topic at hand, but also made students come up with related spontaneous questions. This demonstrated that they were really thinking about what they were working on. This process has trained the students to look at texts in a different, and more analytical way.

Recommendations

- I encourage all language teachers to record at least one of their class discussions. It is a relatively quick and effective way to learn about the way you speak to students, and about the effect that this has on their learning.
- I recommend that teachers plan some of the questions that they wish to ask in advance, as it can be difficult to come up with well-designed questions on the spot.
- I recommend that all language teachers make an effort to increase the proportion of open questions that they use in discussions with students, as I believe that it helps students to attain greater intercultural understanding.

REFLECTION

I was surprised at how difficult I found this investigation. Despite feeling really enthusiastic, and understanding everything so clearly while at the ILTLP conference and recall days, I found it really difficult to get motivated and to clearly set out what I had to do in practice. I think that the difficulty was probably indicative of the fact that I was not teaching in as intercultural a way as I would have liked. I did change quite a bit about the way I teach, and I am now particularly hooked on the use of authentic materials, which are unfortunately a little hard to come by. However, I certainly do not regret participating in the project, and I have come out of it with some useful resources, an improved approach, and a renewed enthusiasm for teaching for intercultural understanding.

Written Language Analysis Grid

Words that are the same as English	German words that you recognise	German words that you can work out